The Permanent Reformation: Elite Factions, Narrative Capture, and the Real Engine of Western Political Change

How the West's Distinctive Trajectory Was Produced Not by the People's Will or the Power of Ideas, but by Successive Constrained Elites Reaching for Available Belief Infrastructures

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Abstract

The standard account of Western political development treats the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the emergence of liberal democracy as intellectual and popular revolutions — moments when better ideas, spread to broader audiences, produced more just institutional arrangements. This paper argues that this account inverts the actual causal sequence. Each of these transformations was driven primarily by elite factions whose material interests were constrained by existing institutional arrangements, who reached for available legitimating frameworks to justify the power they were in the process of seizing, and who required new belief infrastructures to make the resulting arrangements appear as natural order rather than factional victory. The Western case is distinctive not because it escaped this mechanism — no civilization does — but because a structural feature created by Constantine's fourth-century synthesis accidentally embedded two competing legitimating traditions into Western civilization's foundation. This dual infrastructure gave successive elite factions an unusually rich toolkit for narrative appropriation, produced competitive dynamics absent from single-tradition civilizations, and as an unintended byproduct generated the intellectual conditions for modern science and constitutional governance. Understanding this mechanism dissolves persistent mystifications about Western uniqueness, popular sovereignty, and the relationship between ideas and power.

I. The Standard Account and Its Deficiencies

The history of Western political development is typically narrated as a story of expanding freedom. The Protestant Reformation broke the Catholic Church's monopoly on spiritual authority and planted the seeds of individual conscience. The Scientific Revolution demonstrated that human reason, unmediated by ecclesiastical authority, could unlock the secrets of nature. The Enlightenment systematized these insights into a comprehensive program of human liberation — natural rights, social contract, religious toleration, separation of powers. The democratic revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries translated Enlightenment theory into political practice, producing constitutional governments that derived their legitimacy from popular consent rather than divine sanction. The Industrial Revolution and subsequent economic development rewarded this liberated civilization with unprecedented material prosperity. The arc bends toward justice, the story goes, and the engine of that bending is the progressive force of better ideas reaching larger audiences.

This narrative has the advantage of being flattering to everyone it describes: the reformers were courageous, the philosophers were brilliant, the revolutionaries were principled, and the populations who supported them were exercising their authentic political agency. It has the disadvantage of being, in its essential causal claims, incorrect.

The deficiency is not in the details — Luther was courageous, Locke was brilliant, the American founders were in many respects principled. The deficiency is structural: the narrative treats ideas as the independent variable and political change as the dependent one, when the evidence consistently shows the relationship running in the opposite direction. Political actors facing specific institutional constraints reached for available intellectual frameworks that justified their claims. The frameworks that gained state backing survived and flourished. The frameworks that threatened the interests of the faction that won the political contest were suppressed, marginalized, or selectively incorporated in neutered forms. The history of Western thought is substantially the history of ideas that served elite interests being institutionalized as civilization, and ideas that threatened those interests being forgotten, condemned, or quietly defunded.

This paper examines the mechanism behind this process. It draws on a substantial body of historical scholarship that has approached these questions from multiple directions — the sociology of knowledge developed by Karl Mannheim, the analysis of ideology in Antonio Gramsci, the historical sociology of Charles Tilly and Michael Mann, the revisionist historiography of the English Civil War, the economic history of the Reformation, the intellectual history of the Enlightenment's commercial contexts — without synthesizing them into the unified explanatory framework the evidence supports. The synthesis this paper proposes is not novel in its individual claims, most of which have been established in specialized literatures. What is novel is the theoretical architecture that connects them and the comparative context that reveals the pattern's generality.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section II describes the structural feature that makes the Western case distinctive: the dual legitimating infrastructure Constantine accidentally embedded in the fourth century. Section III examines the medieval synthesis that this dual infrastructure produced and analyzes who it served. Sections IV through VII trace the successive factional appropriations — the Protestant Reformation, the Scientific Revolution's political embedding, the

Enlightenment's commercial context, and the construction of liberal democracy as a belief infrastructure. Section VIII examines what was suppressed in each transition, which reveals as much about the mechanism as what was institutionalized. Section IX assesses what the Western case adds to a comparative understanding of belief infrastructure across civilizations.

II. The Accidental Architecture: What Constantine Created and Did Not Intend

To understand why Western civilization produced a specific pattern of elite factional cycling that no other civilization replicated in quite the same form, it is necessary to understand a fourth-century administrative decision whose consequences were entirely unforeseeable at the time.

When Constantine extended imperial patronage to Christianity beginning around 312 CE and made it the empire's favored religion through the subsequent decades of his reign, he was solving a specific governance problem. The Roman empire by the early fourth century was a vast, multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic political structure whose administrative coherence depended on a shared framework of authority that traditional Roman polytheism could no longer provide. The traditional gods were local, multiple, and geographically specific. They offered no basis for unified imperial authority over populations from Britain to Mesopotamia. Christianity, by contrast, was a universal monotheism with an empire-wide organizational network — bishops, communication channels, charitable infrastructure, a literate administrative class — that had been developing for three centuries. Constantine did not convert to Christianity in any spiritually meaningful sense that the evidence can establish. He acquired Christianity as a governance technology, granting it imperial patronage in exchange for the organizational infrastructure it offered.

The critical feature of this acquisition was what Constantine did not discard: the Roman legal and philosophical tradition that constituted the empire's operational backbone. Roman law was the most sophisticated legal system the ancient world had produced, resting on concepts of natural law, rational consistency, and precedent that had nothing to do with Christian scripture. The administrative class that operated the imperial bureaucracy had been educated in Greek philosophy and Latin rhetoric. The military organization, engineering practices, and administrative procedures of Roman governance were entirely independent of any religious framework. Constantine preserved all of this because he had to: governing an empire required the operational infrastructure that Rome had developed, regardless of what theological system was used to legitimate the governance.

The result was a civilization built on two foundations that were genuinely distinct and potentially contradictory. The Judeo-Christian tradition offered authority grounded in divine revelation transmitted through a hierarchical church claiming apostolic succession. Truth came from above, was preserved in scripture, and was interpreted by ordained specialists whose

institutional position gave them exclusive access to its meaning. The Greco-Roman tradition offered authority grounded in reason and nature — discoverable through logical argumentation, empirical observation, and mathematical demonstration without need for supernatural disclosure. Roman law rested on concepts of natural right accessible to human reason. Classical political thought provided models of republican governance and civic virtue that had nothing to do with divine command.

These foundations did not merely coexist. They competed. Whenever a question arose about the source of legitimate authority — who could govern, what laws were binding, whose interpretation of contested matters was final — both traditions offered answers, and the answers were not always compatible. The history of medieval European thought is substantially the history of attempts to reconcile these foundations: Augustine's argument that reason properly employed reaches conclusions faith also teaches, Aquinas's elaborate synthesis of Aristotelian philosophy with Christian theology, the canon lawyers' effort to integrate Roman legal concepts with ecclesiastical authority, the political theorists' attempts to distinguish the proper domains of church and state. None of these syntheses was stable. All were contested. All unraveled under sufficient political pressure.

This dual infrastructure was the structural feature that made Western civilization's subsequent trajectory distinctive. Most major civilizations developed around a single unified cosmological framework that fused religious, legal, and social organization into one comprehensive system. Confucianism integrated ethics, governance, and cosmology so thoroughly that the distinction between philosophical and political authority was difficult to maintain. Islamic civilization unified theology, law, and social organization in ways that made the Greco-Roman distinction between sacred and secular authority conceptually unstable when imported. The Hindu tradition's relationship to governance, while complex and varied, did not produce a competing secular legitimating tradition of the kind Rome had bequeathed to the West.

The consequence of Western civilization's dual infrastructure was that when elite factions found the dominant synthesis constraining, they had a second indigenous tradition available for appropriation. They did not need to import foreign frameworks, whose foreignness could be used against them. They could claim to be recovering authentic Western heritage that had been obscured or suppressed by the current dominant synthesis. This gave Western elite appropriations a specific rhetorical character — the language of reform and recovery rather than revolution and replacement — and a specific structural advantage: arguments that appeal to one half of a civilization's own tradition are far more difficult to dismiss as alien contamination than arguments that must be imported from outside.

III. The Medieval Synthesis and Who It Served

The institutional arrangement that emerged from the centuries following Constantine — the medieval synthesis of papal and imperial authority — was not a planned system. It was the

contingent product of the Western Roman Empire's collapse, the church's survival of that collapse as the only trans-regional institution with organizational capacity, and the subsequent negotiation between ecclesiastical and secular authority as Germanic kingdoms established themselves on the former empire's territory.

By the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the synthesis had crystallized into a recognizable structure. The papacy claimed supreme authority in the spiritual domain, with the power to define doctrine, administer the sacraments that governed entry to heaven, and — in principle — to depose secular rulers who acted contrary to God's law. Secular rulers claimed authority in the temporal domain, with the power to govern, tax, and make war. The boundary between these domains was permanently contested. The Investiture Controversy of the late eleventh century — the conflict between Pope Gregory VII and Emperor Henry IV over who had the authority to appoint bishops — was not an unusual dispute but the clearest expression of a structural tension that the synthesis had never resolved.

The system served specific interests with considerable effectiveness. The ecclesiastical hierarchy — popes, cardinals, bishops, abbots — controlled approximately one-third of productive land in much of Western Europe by the high medieval period, organized through the canon law property system that made church lands inalienable and tax-exempt. The income from these lands, combined with tithes, fees for sacramental services, and the products of pilgrimage economies, made the church the largest economic institution in the medieval West. The aristocratic class that provided most of the senior clergy simultaneously held secular land through feudal tenure arrangements, creating extensive interpenetration between ecclesiastical and secular elite interests. The system's theological legitimation — the great chain of being, the divinely ordained hierarchy of society from peasant to lord to king to pope, the sacramental framework that made ecclesiastical mediation the mechanism of eternal salvation — made this institutional arrangement appear not as the distribution of material advantage to a specific class but as the structure of reality itself.

For the population that worked the land, paid the tithe, purchased indulgences, and provided the labor whose surplus supported both the ecclesiastical and secular hierarchies, the system offered the cosmological framework within which daily life was organized and the promise of eschatological compensation — the afterlife's rewards making present-tense deprivation spiritually meaningful. For the elite, it offered institutional security: the ideological apparatus that made resistance to the established order not merely politically dangerous but spiritually catastrophic.

What the system did not offer, and what its structural features made it unable to offer, was flexibility in the face of changing material conditions. The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries produced conditions the synthesis was not designed to accommodate: the Black Death, which killed approximately one-third of Europe's population and disrupted the labor arrangements on which the feudal economy rested; the growth of commercial cities whose merchant class operated outside the feudal-ecclesiastical property framework; the development of money economies that made feudal obligations in labor and kind increasingly anachronistic; and the corresponding growth of vernacular literacy and communication networks that the ecclesiastical

monopoly on Latin learning could not control. The synthesis that had served the dominant coalition of ecclesiastical and secular elites through the high medieval period was becoming a constraint on new forms of accumulation that new economic actors were developing.

It was this material context — not the spiritual hunger of ordinary people, not the intellectual genius of the reformers — that created the conditions for the Reformation.

IV. Henry VIII and the Mechanism Made Visible

The Protestant Reformation is the Western case's most analytically legible moment precisely because one of its most consequential episodes — the English Reformation — was driven by interests so transparently institutional that the ideological dimension could barely keep pace with the material one.

Henry VIII's break with Rome is conventionally distinguished from the Continental Reformation as lacking genuine theological content — a "political" rather than a "religious" reformation. This distinction misunderstands both cases. What makes the English Reformation analytically useful is not that it was uniquely cynical but that it was unusually transparent. The mechanism that operated covertly in Luther's Germany and Calvin's Geneva operated in plain view in Henry's England, making it easier to read.

Henry's problem was concrete and institutional. He required a male heir to secure the Tudor succession. Catherine of Aragon had produced a daughter and no living sons. He required an annulment of the marriage to Catherine in order to marry Anne Boleyn, who he believed could produce a male heir. The annulment required papal authorization. Pope Clement VII could not authorize it because Catherine was the aunt of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, who effectively controlled Rome following the Sack of 1527 and whose political interests required the papal refusal. The constraint was not theological — Henry had not become convinced that papal authority was scripturally indefensible. The constraint was institutional: a specific structure of authority blocked a specific material requirement.

The solution Henry reached for was the reformist theology that had been developing on the Continent since 1517. The Act of Supremacy of 1534 made Henry the Supreme Head of the Church of England, severing the institutional connection between English Christianity and the Roman papacy. This was not a gradual theological evolution. It was a legislative act, passed by Parliament at the king's direction, that transferred the institutional authority previously held by Rome to the English crown — and with it, the property, the appointments, and the governance power that ecclesiastical authority entailed.

The dissolution of the monasteries between 1536 and 1541 makes the material dimension explicit in ways that confound any purely theological reading. Henry dissolved approximately 800 monasteries, confiscating their lands and assets — approximately one-sixth of all the land in England — and distributing a substantial portion to the nobility and gentry who had supported

the break with Rome. The redistribution created a class of property owners whose economic interests were directly tied to the continuation of the Protestant settlement: to restore Catholicism and the monasteries was to restore the property claims of the dissolved institutions against the new owners. Henry manufactured a coalition for the new religious settlement by giving its members something concrete to defend.

This is the mechanism that Ka'ahumanu used in Hawaii and that Constantine had used thirteen centuries earlier: create stakeholders. Give people material interests in the continuation of the new arrangement, and the new arrangement develops its own constituency for permanence that is independent of ideological conviction.

The reformist theology that provided the legitimating framework for these material moves was genuine in the hands of those who developed it. Tyndale, Cranmer, Latimer — the English reformers who provided the theological content of the English Reformation — believed what they wrote and suffered for those beliefs in many cases. But their theological work served Henry's institutional interests, not because Henry hired them to write ideology (though he effectively did, in some cases), but because the reformist tradition they drew on happened to provide precisely the theological resources that Henry's institutional problem required: the denial of papal supremacy, the assertion of scriptural authority over ecclesiastical tradition, the claim that the visible church had corrupted the primitive Christian faith, and the argument that secular rulers had legitimate authority to reform ecclesiastical corruption.

The Continental Reformation followed the same structural logic with more complex factional arrangements. Luther's challenge to indulgence sales in 1517 was a theological dispute with the Augustinian tradition behind it and genuine pastoral concern driving it. What converted it from a disputatious monk's protest into a civilization-transforming movement was the political appropriation by German princes who found the Lutheran challenge to papal authority directly useful for their own institutional interests. The princes wanted to control church appointments within their territories, wanted church revenues to remain within their principalities rather than flowing to Rome, and wanted the legal and administrative functions that canon law courts had exercised to transfer to secular jurisdiction. Lutheran theology provided theological legitimation for all of these transfers. The princes who protected Luther at the Diet of Worms were not acting from spiritual conviction. They were making a calculation about institutional interest that the theological framework happened to support.

The Peace of Augsburg in 1555 — *cuius regio, eius religio*, "whose realm, his religion" — made the structural logic explicit in treaty form. The religion of a territory was determined by its ruler. This was not religious freedom. It was the territorial prince's right to determine the religious framework of governance within his domain, which is the determination of the belief infrastructure that will organize the population's compliance. The settlement institutionalized the Protestant-Catholic division not as the outcome of popular theological preference but as the product of the political contest among territorial rulers, whose interests had determined which theology each territory would enforce.

V. What the Merchant Class Needed

The Protestant Reformation solved the problem of the reforming princes and of the emergent literate classes whose engagement with scripture and classical learning had made the Catholic synthesis feel inadequate. It did not solve the problem of the commercial classes whose expanding economic activity was producing institutional frictions that neither the Catholic nor the Protestant religious frameworks were equipped to address.

The growth of long-distance trade, banking, and proto-industrial production in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries created a class — the merchants, financiers, and manufacturers who would later be theorized as the bourgeoisie — whose economic interests required institutional arrangements that the prevailing frameworks could not provide. They needed property rights that were secure against arbitrary royal confiscation. They needed contract enforcement through predictable legal processes rather than royal discretion. They needed taxation systems that were rule-governed rather than arbitrary. They needed governance that protected commercial activity from the disruptions that dynastic succession struggles, religious wars, and aristocratic privilege produced. They needed, in short, a political framework oriented toward the requirements of commercial accumulation rather than the requirements of dynastic legitimacy, aristocratic honor, or ecclesiastical salvation.

The intellectual resources for such a framework were not available within the dominant Judeo-Christian tradition. Divine right monarchy, the great chain of being, the ecclesiastical sacramental framework, the spiritual condemnation of usury, the theological hostility to the profit motive — all of these were features of the dominant synthesis that the commercial classes needed to contest or circumvent. What they needed was a legitimating framework that could justify their institutional requirements without direct collision with the theological tradition whose cultural authority was too deep to simply discard.

The Greco-Roman tradition that Constantine had preserved as Western civilization's second foundation offered exactly this. Natural law theory in its Roman Stoic form provided a conception of rational, discoverable moral and legal principles that were independent of divine revelation — accessible to reason without the mediation of the church. Roman legal concepts of property, contract, and civic rights provided models for the institutional arrangements that commercial activity required. Classical republican political thought — Cicero, Livy, Polybius — provided a vocabulary of governance grounded in civic virtue and institutional balance rather than divine sanction. Greek philosophical empiricism provided methods of inquiry that could be applied to the natural world and, by extension, to human social arrangements, without requiring ecclesiastical authorization.

The commercial classes did not fund the development of these intellectual resources because they anticipated their consequences. They funded humanist scholars, established academies, patronized natural philosophers, and sent their sons to the emerging secular universities because these activities produced the educated administrators, legal specialists, and technical experts that commercial enterprise required. The intellectual tradition that grew from this patronage — what we call the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment — was shaped by

the interests of those who funded it, as intellectual traditions always are, without those interests being consciously or conspiratorially translated into intellectual program.

The crucial consequence was that when the commercial classes came into political conflict with the institutional arrangements that constrained them — above all, the divine right monarchy and its alliance with aristocratic privilege — they had an intellectual tradition available for appropriation that provided the legitimating vocabulary their challenge required. They did not need to invent a new framework. They needed to reach for one that was already developed and that had been funded, partly by their own patronage, for different immediate purposes.

VI. The English Revolution and the Mechanism at Scale

The English Civil War of the 1640s and its aftermath — the Interregnum, the Restoration, and finally the Glorious Revolution of 1688 — is the Western case's most instructive episode for understanding how elite factional conflict produces legitimating narrative rather than the reverse. It has been extensively studied, its documentation is extraordinarily rich, and the diversity of positions taken by different participants is complex enough that every theoretical approach to the question finds something to confirm its claims. What the evidence shows, when assessed in aggregate, is the mechanism operating at full visibility.

The conflict that produced the Civil War was, at its institutional core, a dispute about fiscal sovereignty: who had the right to tax, under what conditions, and subject to whose approval. Charles I's attempt to govern without Parliament from 1629 to 1640 — the Personal Rule — was an attempt to escape the institutional constraint that parliamentary approval of taxation imposed on royal revenue-raising. His opponents in Parliament were not, in their majority, ideologically committed republicans or principled advocates of popular sovereignty. They were landowners, lawyers, and merchants whose institutional position gave them a stake in the constraint that parliamentary approval imposed on royal power, and who found the Personal Rule directly threatening to their interests.

The theological dimension of the conflict — the dispute between the Laudian High Church program that Charles supported and the Puritan wing of the church that much of the parliamentary opposition represented — was genuine at the level of religious experience. Many of the men who fought for Parliament were Puritans who believed they were fighting for godly reformation. But the theological alignment mapped onto the factional conflict in ways that the material interests can explain more completely than the theological convictions can. The Laudian program, with its emphasis on hierarchy, ceremony, and episcopal authority, was aligned with royal prerogative. The Puritan program, with its emphasis on the individual conscience, scriptural authority over ecclesiastical tradition, and suspicion of elaborate ceremony, provided resources for challenging both ecclesiastical and royal hierarchy. The theological dispute was genuine; its political alignment was determined by the institutional interests of the factions involved.

What emerged from the revolutionary settlement — or more precisely, from the Glorious Revolution of 1688, which consolidated the outcome in a more durable form — was a constitutional arrangement that secured the specific institutional interests of the winning faction: parliamentary sovereignty over taxation, property rights secure against arbitrary royal confiscation, contract enforcement through common law courts, religious toleration (primarily for Protestant dissenters, considerably less enthusiastically for Catholics and Jews), and commercial regulation through parliamentary legislation rather than royal prerogative. The Whig oligarchy that dominated English politics for most of the subsequent century was not the popular democracy that later interpreters made of it. It was a commercial and landowning elite that had secured the institutional arrangements it required and used the constitutional settlement to make those arrangements permanent.

The political theory that provided the legitimating framework for this settlement — above all, John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* — was not the independent intellectual achievement that causes the political change. It was produced in specific circumstances of political crisis (the Exclusion Crisis of the early 1680s), by a writer whose immediate patrons were Whig grandees with specific institutional interests in the arguments Locke made, and published in 1689 at the precise moment when the Glorious Revolution had produced the political change the arguments justified. The relationship between Locke's theory and the Glorious Revolution is not that the theory produced the revolution. It is that the revolution produced the political conditions that made the theory useful, and the theory provided the legitimating vocabulary that made the revolution's outcome appear as the expression of natural right rather than factional victory.

This is not to diminish Locke's intellectual achievement. The *Two Treatises* are genuine works of political philosophy, and their arguments have internal consistency and philosophical interest that transcend their immediate political context. The point is causal: Locke's arguments achieved civilizational consequence because a specific political faction with specific institutional interests needed exactly those arguments at exactly that moment and had the power to institutionalize them through the settlement they had won. Hundreds of other arguments produced by hundreds of other writers at the same period did not achieve this consequence because they served interests that did not win the political contest.

VII. The Enlightenment's Commercial Context

The Enlightenment — the movement of eighteenth-century thought that extended the implications of seventeenth-century natural philosophy and political theory into a comprehensive program of rational social reform — is the period that most consistently appears in the standard narrative as the independent intellectual revolution that drove political change. The *philosophes* — Voltaire, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Hume, Kant — are presented as the advance guard of modernity, whose ideas spread through the reading public and created the intellectual conditions for the democratic revolutions of the century's end.

The commercial context in which Enlightenment thought was produced, disseminated, and received substantially complicates this picture without eliminating the genuine intellectual achievement it describes.

The institutional infrastructure of the Enlightenment was commercial. The encyclopédie, the great publishing project that systematized Enlightenment knowledge, was a commercial venture — undertaken by Diderot and d'Alembert as a commercial publishing project, sold by subscription, financially dependent on the commercial success of the enterprise. The salons in which Enlightenment ideas circulated were organized primarily by wealthy women whose social position gave them the resources to maintain such institutions, and whose own constrained position within the existing social structure gave them specific interests in some of the arguments that circulated in them. The coffeehouses, literary societies, and Masonic lodges that constituted the Enlightenment's social infrastructure were the institutions of an emergent commercial civil society whose participants had material interests that the Enlightenment's intellectual program happened to serve.

Voltaire's advocacy of religious toleration, commercial freedom, and rational governance was not developed in disinterested isolation from material interests. Voltaire was a wealthy man — an investor in commercial enterprises, a participant in the financial world of eighteenth-century France — whose personal fortune and whose social circle were embedded in the commercial economy that the French state's religious and aristocratic constraints impeded. His advocacy of the English model of commercial liberty and religious toleration was not merely an intellectual preference. It was advocacy for the institutional arrangements under which his own activities, and those of the social world he inhabited, could flourish most effectively.

This observation does not reduce Voltaire to a propagandist for commercial interests. His arguments were made in good faith, developed with genuine intellectual rigor, and addressed questions of genuine moral importance. The observation is about the selection mechanism: Voltaire's arguments achieved the cultural resonance they achieved because they addressed the concerns of a social class with the resources to disseminate and institutionalize them. Arguments that threatened the interests of that class — the more radical democratic theories of Rousseau, the proto-socialist implications of some Enlightenment natural law theory, the feminist arguments of figures like Mary Wollstonecraft — were selectively incorporated, marginalized, or suppressed in the subsequent political settlements.

The institutional embedding of Enlightenment thought in the revolutionary settlements of the late eighteenth century confirms the selective character of the appropriation. The American founding incorporated the natural rights framework, the social contract theory, and the institutional designs of republican governance while explicitly excluding the democratic implications that would have threatened the property-holding classes who dominated the founding. The Constitution's property qualifications for voting, its protection of slavery, its indirect election of senators and the president, its complex system of checks and balances designed partly to restrain popular majorities — all of these features reflect the specific institutional interests of the propertied elite that dominated the founding, not the full implications of the Enlightenment theory they invoked. Jefferson wrote that all men are created equal while owning slaves. This was not

hypocrisy in the simple sense. It was the standard operation of a legitimating framework: the language of natural rights served the interest of establishing authority independent of the English crown, and the limitations of that authority were determined by the interests of those establishing it.

The French Revolution's trajectory from the Declaration of the Rights of Man to the Terror to Napoleon is the most dramatic demonstration of what happens when the popular implications of the Enlightenment legitimating framework are actually attempted. The Jacobin program — attempting to realize in practice the egalitarian implications of natural rights theory — was destroyed by the coalition of propertied interests that it threatened, from within France as much as from without. What survived the revolutionary period, institutionalized through the Napoleonic Code and the subsequent constitutional settlements, was the Enlightenment's protections for property rights, commercial freedom, and rational governance — the features that served the interests of the emerging bourgeois class — while the more radical egalitarian implications were systematically suppressed.

VIII. Liberal Democracy as Belief Infrastructure

Liberal democracy — the political system based on elected representative government, individual rights, separation of powers, and the rule of law — is not presented in contemporary Western discourse as a belief infrastructure serving specific interests. It is presented as the natural form of legitimate governance, the endpoint of political development, the system that all societies will eventually reach if they are allowed to develop freely. This presentation is itself the belief infrastructure's primary accomplishment: making a specific institutional arrangement, which serves specific interests, appear as universal natural order.

Understanding liberal democracy as belief infrastructure does not require concluding that it is bad, hypocritical, or merely cynical. The assessment of liberal democracy's benefits and costs compared to its historical alternatives is a separate question from the analysis of its ideological function. The framework this paper applies holds, as a foundational methodological principle, that the sincerity of those who construct and maintain a belief system is analytically irrelevant to understanding what it does. Constantine may have had genuine spiritual experiences. Ka'ahumanu may have genuinely found the kapu unjust. The English Whigs may have genuinely believed in parliamentary sovereignty as a principle and not merely as a convenience. None of this changes the analysis of what the belief system accomplished institutionally.

Liberal democracy accomplished several things simultaneously. It provided a legitimating framework for the commercial and professional classes whose material interests the system institutionally protected. It naturalized the hierarchy that emerged from industrial capitalism by presenting market outcomes as the product of individual choice operating in fair competition, making economic inequality appear as the natural result of differential talent and effort rather than as the outcome of institutional arrangements that advantaged some actors over others

from the beginning. It created a mechanism — democratic elections — that gave the population a genuine if constrained role in governance, sufficient to generate the investment in the system's legitimacy that made coercion costs manageable, while preserving the institutional constraints that prevented popular majorities from using political power to challenge the property arrangements that the system's primary beneficiaries required.

The franchise's gradual extension — to men without property, then to women, then to racialized minorities previously excluded — follows a pattern that the framework predicts. Extension occurred when the cost of exclusion exceeded the cost of inclusion: when excluded groups had developed the organizational capacity to make exclusion more expensive to maintain than accommodation, and when inclusion could be accomplished in ways that incorporated the newly enfranchised into the existing system's logic rather than threatening it. The women's suffrage movement achieved the vote after seventy years of agitation partly because the First World War had demonstrated women's indispensable economic role in industrial production, making continued exclusion from the civic framework that organized industrial governance increasingly costly to the system's overall coherence. The Civil Rights Movement achieved formal legal equality in the 1960s partly because the Cold War competition made American racial apartheid an international liability that the foreign policy establishment found damaging, and partly because the Black community's economic integration into the industrial economy had made formal exclusion from civic rights a structural friction.

In each case, the extension of the democratic franchise was accomplished by incorporating newly included groups into the existing legitimating framework rather than by transforming the framework's substantive commitments. The vote was extended. The institutional arrangements that determined what the vote could change were preserved. The belief infrastructure's function — making the prevailing distribution of material advantage appear as natural order legitimated by popular consent — was maintained and in some respects strengthened by each extension, because each extension expanded the population that had been made invested in the system's continuation.

The specific ideological content of liberal democratic belief infrastructure — the valorization of individual liberty, the primacy of property rights, the equation of political freedom with the freedom to participate in market activity, the presentation of market outcomes as meritocratic rather than as the products of institutional arrangements — serves recognizable interests. It serves them not primarily through conspiracy or conscious manipulation but through the normal operation of any institutional system: the ideas, frameworks, and interpretive traditions that help the system function and that help those who prosper within it understand their prosperity as deserved are the ideas that get funded, taught, celebrated, and transmitted. The ideas that challenge the system's foundational arrangements are the ideas that must struggle for resources, institutional space, and cultural legitimacy.

IX. What Gets Suppressed: The Counter-Evidence

The most revealing evidence for the mechanism this paper describes is not what gets institutionalized in each transition but what gets suppressed. The selection mechanism that elevates certain ideas and marginalizes others leaves traces in the historical record, and those traces consistently show the pattern the framework predicts: the ideas that threatened the material interests of the faction that won the political contest were the ideas that were suppressed, regardless of their intellectual merit, popular appeal, or internal consistency.

The English Revolution produced not only Lockean liberalism but a range of more radical programs — the Levellers' demand for universal male suffrage and equality before the law, the Diggers' communal agricultural program, the various Fifth Monarchist and Ranter religious movements whose egalitarian implications extended into social and economic life. These programs had genuine popular support in the revolutionary army and in the artisan and laboring classes of the 1640s. They were suppressed by Cromwell's government using military force and legal prohibition, not because they failed philosophically or lacked adherents, but because they threatened the property arrangements that the dominant parliamentary faction required. The Leveller leaders were imprisoned. The Digger communities were physically destroyed. The radical religious movements were prosecuted. Lockean liberalism was institutionalized. The selection was not intellectual. It was political.

The American Revolution produced not only the Constitution but Thomas Paine's more egalitarian vision, the agrarian democracy that Jefferson sometimes invoked and consistently failed to institutionalize, the abolitionist movement whose moral claims were fully consistent with the natural rights framework the founders invoked, and the various artisan republican traditions that understood the revolution as an opportunity to challenge not only British colonial rule but domestic economic inequality. All of these were present in the revolutionary coalition. All were selectively incorporated or suppressed in the constitutional settlement. Paine died in relative obscurity after his more egalitarian pamphlets made him a liability to the respectable founding. Abolitionism was explicitly compromised in the constitutional text to maintain the Southern slaveholders in the coalition. Artisan republicanism was marginalized as the constitutional framework prioritized property rights over the more democratic implications of republican theory.

The pattern extends into the intellectual history of economics. The classical economics that emerged as the dominant framework for understanding market society in the early nineteenth century — Smith, Ricardo, Malthus — contained within it a range of implications that the discipline's subsequent development selectively retained or discarded. The labor theory of value, which Ricardo developed and which Marx would later use to argue that profit was extracted surplus rather than the legitimate return to capital, was central to classical economics. It was progressively marginalized from mainstream economic theory across the nineteenth century, not primarily because it was analytically refuted — the marginalist revolution that replaced it was motivated by concerns that were explicitly not about analytical superiority — but because its implications were threatening to the interests of those who funded and institutionalized economic thought. The economics that survived and flourished was the economics that naturalized market outcomes as the product of free exchange among rational actors. The economics that challenged this naturalization was relegated to heterodox margins.

None of this means that liberal economics, liberal political theory, or liberal democratic governance are simply masks for class interest. It means that they were selected, from among a range of available intellectual options, partly because they served specific interests, and that the selection was accomplished through institutional mechanisms — funding, academic appointments, publication, political endorsement, legal protection — that the winning factions controlled. The ideas that survived are not necessarily worse than the ideas that were suppressed. They are the ideas that won a political contest that was about institutional interest, not intellectual quality.

X. Why This Pattern Has Been Misread

The persistent misreading of this pattern — the insistence that Western political development was driven by the progressive force of better ideas reaching broader audiences — is itself a product of the mechanism it misreads. The belief infrastructure of liberal democracy includes, as one of its central features, an account of its own origins that naturalizes its emergence: the Enlightenment was the triumph of reason over superstition, the democratic revolutions were the triumph of popular sovereignty over tyranny, the market economy was the triumph of freedom over feudal constraint. This account serves the interests of the system it describes by making the system's emergence appear inevitable and its continuation appear as the expression of natural human tendencies toward freedom, rationality, and progress.

The academic disciplines that study these questions were themselves produced within and substantially shaped by the institutional framework whose origins they analyze. Political science as a discipline was institutionalized in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by academics operating within universities that were financed substantially by commercial wealth and organized around assumptions about the naturalness of liberal democratic governance. Economic history as a discipline developed within the same institutional context. The sociology of knowledge — the analysis of how ideas are produced and what interests they serve — was itself a contested intellectual tradition, developed primarily by scholars in the German and later the continental European tradition, that struggled for institutional legitimacy in the Anglo-American academy precisely because its central questions challenged the dominant framework's self-understanding.

The comparative context that this paper draws on — the analysis of how belief infrastructures serve elite interests in non-Western civilizations — has been more available to scholars precisely because the civilizations being analyzed are not the civilizations whose belief infrastructure organizes the scholars' own institutions. It is easier to see that the Mesopotamian temple economy naturalized extraction than to see that liberal democracy does the same thing, because the temple priests are not the ones who have endowed the university chair from which the analysis is conducted.

This is not a claim that objectivity is impossible or that all analyses are equally distorted by institutional position. It is an observation that the institutional pressures shaping intellectual production consistently favor analyses that support the legitimating framework of the institutions that fund intellectual production, and that overcoming this pressure requires sustained methodological effort — which is precisely what comparative analysis across civilizations provides. When the same structural mechanism is visible in the Ur III temple economy, the Indian caste system, the Aztec sacrifice theology, the Chinese examination system, and the liberal democratic commercial republic, the coincidence is evidence. The mechanism is not specific to non-Western civilizations. It is the standard response to a universal governance problem. Western civilization's specific version of it has simply been more successfully naturalized, partly because Western civilization produced the academic disciplines that study governance.

XI. Framework Assessment: What the Western Case Adds

The Western case adds to a comparative understanding of belief infrastructure across civilizations several findings that no single-civilization analysis could produce.

The dual infrastructure as competitive generator. The finding that most directly distinguishes the Western case from every other civilization analyzed is the consequence of the dual legitimating infrastructure that Constantine's synthesis created. Single-tradition civilizations — those where a unified cosmological framework fused religious, legal, and social authority — produced belief infrastructure cycles in which the dominant synthesis was challenged by movements that had to operate within or against that single tradition. The challenges were typically absorbed, suppressed, or produced schisms within the tradition. Western civilization's dual infrastructure made a different pattern possible: a constrained elite faction could reach for the second indigenous tradition and appropriate it without needing to challenge the civilization's entire legitimating framework, only the currently dominant synthesis within it. This produced faster cycling, more competitive dynamics, and as an unintended consequence, the institutionalization of an intellectual tradition — the Greco-Roman empirical and rational one — that happened to contain the methods of modern science as part of its classical inheritance. The scientific and industrial revolutions were not caused by the Enlightenment's intellectual program. They were enabled, accidentally, by the political victory of a faction that used the Enlightenment's intellectual program as its legitimating framework, and whose political victory institutionalized that program in universities, legal systems, and governance structures where the scientific method could be pursued with social legitimacy and material support.

The reform language as appropriation signature. Every major Western political transition was described by its participants as reform or recovery rather than revolution or replacement. The Reformation recovered authentic Christianity from papal corruption. The English constitutionalists recovered ancient liberties from royal usurpation. The American founders recovered republican principles from imperial tyranny. Each of these described a transition that

was, in structural terms, the replacement of one elite's legitimating framework by another's — but the language of recovery and reform rather than replacement made the transition less threatening to those who might otherwise resist. This is the dual infrastructure's rhetorical advantage: when both traditions are indigenous, appealing to the suppressed one can be presented as authenticity rather than innovation. The mechanism explains both the language of Western political change — always reformist, always appealing to prior authority — and the persistence of that language into contemporary politics, where every significant political movement describes itself as recovering authentic principles betrayed by current practitioners.

The naturalization of market hierarchy as the modern system's primary accomplishment. The belief infrastructure of liberal democracy accomplished something that the monarchical and ecclesiastical systems it replaced could not: it naturalized an economic hierarchy that produced greater inequality than the feudal system while appearing to legitimate individual mobility through merit and market competition. The divine right framework and the great chain of being naturalized hierarchy through cosmic decree — the serf was at the bottom because God put him there. Liberal democratic market ideology naturalized hierarchy through voluntary exchange — the poor person is at the bottom because their choices and talents produced that outcome in a fair competition. The second naturalization is more resilient than the first because it shifts the explanation for inequality from external imposition to internal character, making the disadvantaged person's situation appear as the product of their own nature rather than of the institutional arrangements they were born into. This shift in the naturalization mechanism — from cosmic decree to meritocratic outcome — is the central ideological innovation of the period this paper analyzes, and it required the full sequence of factional appropriations this paper traces to produce.

The suppression record as the mechanism's clearest evidence. The consistent pattern of suppression — the Levellers imprisoned, the Diggers destroyed, Paine marginalized, abolitionism compromised, labor economics relegated — is the most direct evidence that the transitions this paper describes were driven by factional interest rather than intellectual progress. In each transition, the ideas that survived and flourished were not necessarily the most intellectually sophisticated or the most genuinely popular. They were the ideas that served the interests of the faction that won the political contest and controlled the institutional infrastructure through which ideas were disseminated, funded, and transmitted across generations. The ideas that were suppressed were suppressed by that same institutional infrastructure. The history of Western thought cannot be read as the progressive refinement of good ideas without accounting for what was suppressed and explaining why. When the explanation for suppression consistently aligns with the material interests of the dominant faction, the intellectual account is insufficient and the structural one is required.

Conclusion: What Changes and What Does Not

The analysis this paper presents does not lead to cynicism about Western political development. The transition from divine right monarchy to constitutional governance produced real improvements in the conditions of life for large numbers of people. The extension of the franchise, whatever its limitations and whatever the interests it served, gave previously excluded populations genuine power that they have used in genuine ways. The rule of law, however imperfectly realized, constrains the arbitrary exercise of power in ways that matter to the people who would otherwise be subject to it. The analysis of a belief infrastructure's function does not require concluding that the infrastructure produces only the outcomes it was designed to serve.

What the analysis requires is that we be precise about what drove these changes and therefore what can and cannot be expected to drive further ones. If the Protestant Reformation was driven primarily by Henry VIII's succession problem and the German princes' institutional interests, the lesson is not that principled reformers cannot matter — they can, at the margins — but that the reformers who changed civilization did so because their principles aligned with the interests of factions that had the material power to institutionalize them. If the Enlightenment's political program was shaped by the institutional interests of the commercial classes who funded and patronized it, the lesson is not that reason and argument are powerless — they are not — but that the arguments that achieve civilizational consequence are the arguments that serve interests capable of backing them with institutional power.

The corollary for the present is uncomfortable. The same mechanism that produced the transitions this paper analyzes continues to operate. The contemporary political landscape — the fragmentation of the liberal democratic consensus, the rise of populist nationalist movements, the competition between social democratic and neoliberal variants of the market system — is not a departure from the Western pattern. It is the pattern continuing. Constrained elite factions are reaching for available legitimating frameworks. Some of those frameworks are new; most are elaborations or combinations of existing ones. The faction that achieves sufficient material power to institutionalize its preferred framework will determine what the next synthesis looks like, and the next synthesis will be described by its beneficiaries as the expression of natural order, popular will, or the recovery of authentic principles. The people who will be governed under that synthesis will mostly experience it as the way things are, which is what every successful belief infrastructure produces.

Understanding this is not the same as being powerless within it. It is the precondition for any realistic assessment of where leverage exists and where it does not — which questions of political change can be answered by philosophical argument, which require shifting material conditions, and which require identifying the specific institutional constraints that specific elite factions are currently motivated to escape. The history of Western political change, read with the mechanism visible, is not a history of inevitable progress. It is a series of contingent factional victories, each of which settled some questions while deferring others, and none of which resolved the underlying dynamic that produced it. The reformation is always in progress. The question is always who is being reformed, by whom, and toward whose benefit.

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